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The Latest State of the Union

A certain danger dwells in an attempt, by any President, to issue a State of the Union Message in mid-September. By September, it is too late in the year to introduce important new legislation. But the administration is already locked into a new budget and its highly specific commitments still have nine and a half months to run. It is simultaneously too early in the fiscal year, and too late in the congressional year, to strike out toward new purposes.

By autumn, as every President has discovered in his turn, he can hardly do more than chide Congress and snipe at his opposition. Consequently, it is hardly astonishing that President Nixon's autumnal State of the Union Message is mainly devoted to chiding Congress and sniping at his opposition. The policies that this message offers are mostly familiar. But rather than reproaching the President for a failure of inspiration, it is better to accept the document for what it inevitably is: an attempt by the White House to be seen to be "governing"; to shake off the lethargy of recent months and to exorcise the political disasters that they brought. It is an effort by Mr. Nixon to show the country a President following the normal concerns of the presidency.

The message gives its primary attention to the inflation and the fuel shortages, and surely it is right in that judgment. But on both of these questions it provides answers that are considerably less than satisfactory. This long document makes, in its opening lines, an urgent and ringing appeal: "Americans want and deserve action to fight rising prices. And they want every possible step taken now—not a year from now or in the next session of Congress." But what does Mr. Nixon propose? Not much, actually. He urges Congress not to bust the budget limits of which he has made inordinately much over the past year. But the boom has brought the Treasury a flood of unexpected income tax revenues, and the last quarter of fiscal 1973, ending in June, showed the federal budget in surplus—a hairbreadth surplus, but the first since 1969 when Mr. Nixon took office. Congress is less of a threat to Mr. Nixon's surplus at this point than the courts which, in a succession of cases, have now held various presidential impoundments of funds to be illegal.

Congress has, in fact, cooperated with Mr. Nixon on the essential legislation directed to the inflation. There is only a limited number of things that legislation can do, but this Congress has on the whole been both diligent and responsive. So far this year there have been two bills that were truly crucial to the administration's program against inflation. One was the extension of the wage and price control law, and the other was the farm bill. Both have been signed into law, on terms satisfactory to Mr. Nixon. In order to try to shift some of the blame for inflation onto Congress, he has been reduced to picking fights on issues of dubious relevance like the minimum wage bill.

Regarding the fuels shortage and energy policy, this message is the latest evidence of a profound indecision within the White House. It is as though there were two policies engaged in hand-to-hand combat, one sometimes

gaining the upper hand and sometimes the other. On some occasions, the White House wants to attack the shortages by a desperately vigorous exploitation of every possible means to expand supplies almost regardless of cost. On other occasions, the White House speaks of conservation as well. Mr. Nixon suspects, no doubt correctly, that conservation would not be popular in a country accustomed to heating its buildings to shirtsleeve temperatures all winter. He wavers on conservation, and the successive wavers are recorded in his various pronouncements. His April message on energy put all the emphasis on expanding supply. His June message on the same subject stressed, in contrast, conservation. But in recent weeks he has wavered away from the idea of conservation again, and this message, once more, calls for a vast expansion of supplies and not much else.

The trouble with this choice is that expanding supplies cannot be done fast enough to help us much this winter. Of all his various proposals, the only one having any immediate effect is the opening of the Elk Hills naval reserve to commercial production. It is a good idea. The concept of a naval oil reserve has become totally obsolete. But Elk Hills does not promise enough oil over the coming year to reduce the risks of winter shortages to an acceptable level. Of Mr. Nixon's various conflicting statements on energy so far, the June position was the most realistic and constructive. It is a pity that now, in September, he has reverted to April.

This message runs to 25 long and densely filled pages. On page 21, tucked between a reference to the need for capital punishment and a paragraph on the Bicentennial, a diligent reader can find a brief reference to the reform of campaign practices. Mr. Nixon limits himself to repeating his recommendation for a commission to study the topic. But most Americans will doubtless feel that, if there is one subject on which recent events have adequately educated them, it is the defects of the federal laws on political campaigns. Mr. Nixon has already contributed more than enough to that education, and the proposal for a commission is a feeble one. It is best pushed aside. The responsibility for reform now lies directly with Congress, which ought to know perfectly well that the time has long since arrived for decisive legislation.

Mr. Nixon shows great concern, in this message, over the balance of authority between himself and Congress. His ambivalence is evident as, in successive paragraphs, he pledges cooperation, trundles out more accusations of bad faith, urges a "congressional renaissance," and lectures Congress on the limits of its proper station in life. Thus, this document illustrates the central defect in Mr. Nixon's attitude toward Congress: he is totally unwilling to share with Congress any element of credit for the achievements of the American government over the the past five years. It is hard to build much cooperation on so narrow a foundation. Yet the message also contains within it a degree of recognition that the administration will need more help from Congress in its last years than it did in its first years. Mr. Nixon has not yet found a way to fit these two truths together.